Community CORNER

NIH electronic Research Administration (eRA)
by Manju Subramanya

NIH to pilot data through Grants.gov in spring/summer... Goal to go live for select grants types by fall of 2005

The National Institutes of Health's electronic Research Administration (eRA) is working closely to integrate its system with Grants.gov, the main federal portal for finding and applying for grants, with the goal of accepting live applications for select opportunities and grants mechanisms through Grants.gov in fall of 2005.

NIH eRA will run a system to system pilot with Grants.gov in the spring or summer of 2005, using the standard federal form 424RR used by Grants.gov to receive electronic applications.

Towards that end, eRA has mapped the 424RR data elements to the eRA database and submitted data elements specific to NIH from its PHS 398 form to supplement the 424RR. Grants.gov will complete soon the development of the PHS-specific forms and schema. In addition, eRA has defined business validations for Grants.gov and requirements for generating a grant image based on the 424RR format. While eRA designs and develops the software to receive Grants.gov applications via a system-to-system interface, it is also working on the instructions tailored to PHS applicants that will accompany the new forms set.

Live applications in fall 2005
Much more is in the works.

Last summer, eRA conducted a basic system-to-system testing with Grants.gov to check fundamental functions such as its ability to download packages from Grants.gov. This spring or summer, eRA will build on that experience by inviting Commons Working Group members to participate in user acceptance testing The goal of the exercise will be to get as much feedback as possible from participants both to iron out any wrinkles and to see how best to attune the grants community to this major change in grant submission.

This summer, eRA plans to implement lessons learned in the user acceptance test and conduct a pilot using live applications. eRA is weighing two approaches — one is to find a Request For Application (RFA) grant opportunity from an institution willing to try out cutting edge electronic submissions; the second way is to set up a grant opportunity that will be open to a certain number of people who will apply in a "live" fashion. The pilot will set the stage for eRA to accept applications live through Grants.gov for select opportunities and grant types in the fall of 2005.

eRA and Grants.gov will work together to set up a seamless technical assistance program for applicants. Some questions will pertain to Grants.gov while others will fall to NIH, but the user should receive immediate answers for all queries.

NIH to validate applications

NIH eRA's role in accepting grants applications through Grants.gov will consist of running validation checks on those applications to ensure that they are compliant with NIH and other Health and Human Services (HHS) business rules. If the application has errors that make it unacceptable or warnings that indicate the applicant may want to redo certain portions, the error or warning messages will go back to the applicant via the NIH eRA Commons. The applicant will have the opportunity to correct the application before final submission through Grants.gov.

After validation, the Principal Investigator (PI) and Signing Official (SO) will view the new grant image in the Commons and if content with the image, will verify the application, tantamount to a sign off. The PI and SO will also have the option of rejecting the application and trying again or submitting on paper.

With Commons playing an integral role in this process, it is important to emphasize that PIs and Signing Officials who plan to submit through Grants.gov need to be registered in the Commons.

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eRA is also working with the Department of Health and Human Services' Operating Divisions (OPDIVs) — such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and in a more limited fashion with Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) with the goal of accepting their applications through Grants.gov.

Role of Service Providers

As this Grants.gov-NIH eRA collaboration continues to grow, eRA envisions that the current eRA Service Providers —those companies that have been the intermediary between applicants and NIH in electronic submission—will have their own role in the process. Just as Grants.gov is working with federal agencies like NIH to build a system-to-system interface, it is working on similar exchanges with applicants, such as universities like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and some Service Providers offering commercial products and services to grantees.

Service Providers will modify their existing systems so that they can submit applications to Grants.gov. It is anticipated that some applicants will rely on these Service Providers to provide business validations upfront to ensure that their first grant submission is successful.

eRA also foresees that error messages from NIH to the applicant will be routed to the Service Provider, instead of working through the Commons.
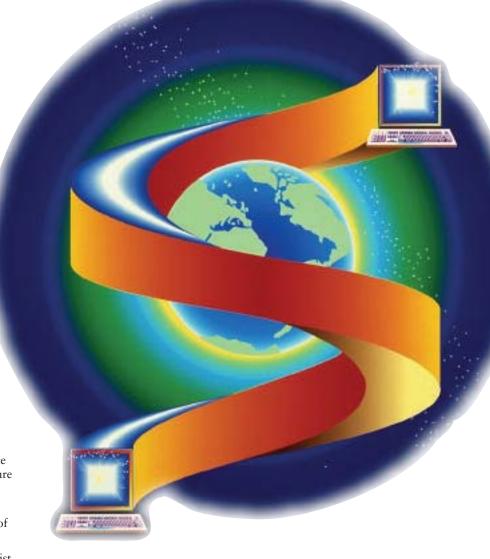
Another opportunity for Service Providers may be to assist those applicants who may be working from Macintosh computers that are not compatible with the PureEdge Viewer system that Grants.gov uses for submitting applications.

Submitting grants electronically to NIH

While Grants.gov will ultimately be the main portal for electronic grant submission, they are fully supportive of NIH's current system-to-system approach as an interim gateway to initiate the electronic process for submission. This approach involves applicants using a Service Provider, one of six companies that offer high-end software compatible with NIH systems, to submit electronic applications directly to NIH. The Service Providers provide the system in which to enter the appropriate information and convert it into the proper electronic format to send to NIH.

NIH has successfully tested direct electronic submission through four pilots since October 2003. In these pilots, Principal Investigators from more than 30 institutions around the country have submitted more than 100 applications to NIH through a Service Provider. In January 2005, NIH reached a major milestone when it opened the door for applicants to electronically submit an unlimited number of select grants.

Applicants recognize there are many pluses to submitting a grant application electronically. Images of electronic applications are in color instead of black and white for scanned paper applications. The graphics on electronic applications also are clearer than any scanned image of applications submitted on paper. The electronic process also has built in checks to prevent the applicant from common errors that can lead to problems in grant submission or delays in review.

In addition, by using electronic submissions, the NIH hopes to shorten the waiting time from submission to award. For instance, with electronic submissions, NIH's Division of Receipt and Referral does not need to scan upon receipt as it does paper applications.

NIH has embarked on this initiative with the vision of saving time, paper and space and streamlining the grant application process. Paperless submission is the wave of the future.

Applications due June/July

The next round of competing grant applications are due June 1, 2005 and July 1, 2005. For those dates, NIH will electronically accept R01s, R03s and R21 grant applications (new, competing continuation and revised) that are modular (seeking less than $250,000 a year). Other restrictions may apply. NIH continues to pilot full budget applications.

For detailed information on submitting competing grant applications electronically, go to http://era.nih.gov/Projectmgmt/SBIR/sbir_grants.htm. NIH encourages all applicants to get in touch with a Service Provider and send in their applications electronically. You can also find more information about eRA's collaboration with Grants.gov on this website.

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